

THAILAND 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution “prohibits discrimination based on religious belief” and protects religious liberty as long as the exercise of religious freedom is not “harmful to the security of the State.” The law officially recognizes five religious groups: Buddhists, Muslims, Brahmin-Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians. The Ministry of Justice allows the practice of sharia as a special legal process outside the national civil code for Muslim residents of the “Deep South” – described as the four southernmost provinces near the Malaysian border, including three with a Muslim majority – for family law, including inheritance.

Authorities continued to use emergency decree and martial law provisions in effect in the Deep South that gave military, police, and civilian authorities powers to restrict certain basic rights, including extending pretrial detention and expanding warrantless searches. Authorities delegated certain internal security powers to the armed forces, often resulting in accusations by Muslims of unfair treatment, such as disproportionate searches of vehicles with Muslim passengers. The Muslim community in the Deep South continued to express frustration with perceived discriminatory treatment by security forces and what they described as a judicial system that lacked adequate checks and balances. According to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Deep South Watch, through September, authorities had conducted 90 raid-and-search operations against Muslim insurgents.

In May, Muslim leaders objected to the transfer of a Buddhist district chief in Narathiwat Province from the district to Bangkok; religious leaders accused the chief of abuse of power and insulting Islam. Buddhist groups called for an investigation into the transfer, claiming the statements and actions by Muslim leaders against the district chief constituted discrimination against the Buddhist minority. During the year, media outlets and NGOs reported that several dozen Uyghur Muslims from China remained in immigrant detention centers, most of them detained since 2015. In a change from previous years, there were no reports that immigration authorities conducted raids to detain refugees (including those fleeing religious persecution) registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

There were continued attacks against both Buddhists and Muslims in the Malay Muslim-majority Deep South, where religious and ethnic identity are closely linked in a longstanding separatist conflict. According to Deep South Watch, as of September 30, violence in the Deep South resulted in at least 88 deaths – among them 57 Muslims, 28 Buddhists, and three individuals with unidentified religious affiliation – compared with 86 deaths, including 59 Muslims, 26 Buddhists, and two with unidentified religious affiliation, in the same period in 2021. Authorities blamed insurgents for the August 17 coordinated bomb and arson attacks on convenience stores and gas stations at 17 locations in Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani Provinces in the Deep South. One man was killed and at least seven injured in what was described as the biggest attack in the Deep South in four years. Authorities blamed Muslim insurgents for an August 15 attack in Su-ngai Padi District of Narathiwat Province, where a female Buddhist lost her legs in a landmine explosion and an August 3 attack in the same district where two Buddhist villagers were shot and killed.

Some Buddhist groups continued to express frustration with perceived special allowances for Muslims. On September 20, the NGO Protect Buddhism for Peace requested the retail conglomerate owner of 7-11 minimarts stop selling halal branded products, arguing there were more Buddhists and Christians than Muslims in the country and that non-Muslims should not have to buy expensive Central Islamic Council of Thailand halal brands. Buddhist activists continued to campaign to designate Buddhism as the country's official religion.

On November 19, the U.S. Vice President met with Supreme Patriarch Somdej Phra Ariyavamsagatanana, the highest figure in Thai Buddhism, at Wat Ratchabophit and affirmed U.S. respect for Buddhism. During the year, the Chargé d'Affaires hosted an iftar for 32 prominent Muslim leaders to advance religious freedom, tolerance, and interfaith dialogue. U.S. embassy officials regularly met with religious leaders and scholars, international NGOs, academics, and representatives of faith-based organizations to discuss religious pluralism and tolerance as well as the plight of refugees fleeing religious violence. The Ambassador, and other embassy officials frequently visited religious sites of local significance and engaged in discussion with religious leaders on issues related to tolerance and diversity. The embassy awarded multiple grants to partners in the Deep South for projects focusing on diversity and inclusion, youth engagement, community building, and digital literacy/disinformation training. Embassy officials

led quarterly virtual conversations with faith leaders, bringing together academics, religious leaders, community organizers, and youth influencers to create new connections, share perspectives on religious freedom issues, and consider future collaboration. In addition, the Chargé d’Affaires visited the Deep South and hosted an iftar with local religious leaders and engaged university students in an interfaith community-building project.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the country’s total population at 69.6 million (midyear 2022). In December 2021, the Department of Religious Affairs reported that the population is 92.5 percent Buddhist, 5.4 percent Muslim, and 1.2 percent Christian. Other groups include animists, Confucians, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs, and Taoists.

Most Buddhists incorporate Hindu and animist practices into their worship. The Buddhist clergy (*sangha*) consists of two main schools of Theravada Buddhism: Mahanikaya and Dhammayuttika. The former is older and more prevalent within the monastic community.

Islam is the dominant religion in three of the four southernmost provinces (Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani) near the Malaysian border. The majority of Muslims there are ethnic Malay, but the Muslim population nationwide also includes descendants of immigrants from South Asia, China, Cambodia, and Indonesia, as well as ethnic Thai. Religious Affairs Department (RAD) of the Ministry of Culture statistics indicate that 99 percent of Muslims are Sunni.

The majority of ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese practice either Mahayana or Theravada Buddhism. Many ethnic Chinese, as well as members of the Mien hill tribe, also practice forms of Taoism. The majority of Christians are ethnic Chinese and are also represented among ethnic tribal groups in the north. More than half of the Christian community is Roman Catholic.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution “prohibits discrimination based on religious belief,” It states that all persons are equal before the law regardless of religious belief and allows all persons to profess, observe, or practice any religion of their choice as long as the exercise of these freedoms is not “harmful to the security of the State.” The constitution empowers the state to patronize and protect Buddhism as well as other religions, but it also provides for special promotion of Theravada Buddhism through education, the propagation of its principles, and the establishment of measures and mechanisms “to prevent the desecration of Buddhism in any form.”

A special order issued by the former military government in 2016 and still in effect provides for the state’s promotion and protection of “all recognized religions” in the country, but it mandates that all state agencies monitor the “right teaching” of all religions to ensure they are not “distorted to upset social harmony.” Defaming or insulting Buddhism and Buddhist clergy is specifically prohibited by law. Violators may face up to one year’s imprisonment, fines of up to 20,000 baht (\$580), or both. The penal code prohibits the insult or disturbance of religious places or services of all officially recognized religious groups. Penalties range from imprisonment for one to seven years, a fine of 20,000 to 140,000 baht (\$580 to \$4,100), or both.

The law officially recognizes five religious groups: Buddhists, Muslims, Brahmin-Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians. While there is no official state religion, the constitution requires the King to be Buddhist and declares that he is the “upholder of religions.”

Religious groups associated with one of the five officially recognized religions may register to receive state benefits that include access to state subsidies, exemption from property and income taxes, and preferential allocation of resident visas for the registered organization’s foreign officials. Registration as a religious group is not mandatory, and religious groups may operate without government interference, whether they are officially registered or recognized or not. The RAD is responsible for registering religious groups, excluding Buddhist groups, which are overseen by the National Buddhism Bureau (NBB), an independent state agency under direct supervision of the Prime Minister.

The RAD may register a new religious denomination outside one of the five recognized religious groups only if it meets the following qualifications: the

national census indicates the group has at least 5,000 adherents, possesses a uniquely recognizable theology, is not politically active, and obtains formal approval in a RAD-organized meeting of representatives from the concerned ministries and the five recognized umbrella religious groups. To register with the RAD, a religious group's leader also must submit documentation on the group's objectives and procedures, any relationship to a foreign country, a list of executive members and senior officials, and locations of administrative, religious, and teaching sites. In practice, however, the government as a matter of policy will not recognize any new religious groups outside the five umbrella groups.

The constitution prohibits Buddhist priests, novices, monks, and other clergy from voting in elections, serving in the House of Representatives or Senate, or taking public positions on political matters. According to the NBB, as of November 2021 there were 239,023 clergy who were thus ineligible to vote or run for office. Christian clergy are allowed to vote in elections as long as they are not wearing formal religious attire. Except for the *Chularatchamontri* (Grand Mufti), imams are not regarded as priests or clergy and are thus allowed to vote in elections and assume political positions.

The Sangha Supreme Council serves as Thai Buddhism's governing clerical body. The King has unilateral authority to appoint or remove members from the Sangha Supreme Council irrespective of the monk's rank and without consent or consultation with the Supreme Patriarch, whom the King also has legal authority to appoint.

The penal code bars any activity that insults or defames a religion, whether directed at a sacred object or place of worship, and it specifies that offenders shall be subject to two to seven years' imprisonment or a fine of 2,000 to 14,000 baht (\$58-\$410), or both.

The law requires religious education for all students at both the primary and secondary levels; students may not opt out. The curriculum must contain information about all of the five recognized umbrella religious groups. Students who wish to pursue in-depth studies of a particular religion may study at private religious schools and may transfer credits to public schools. Individual schools, working in conjunction with their local administrative boards, are authorized to arrange additional religious studies courses. There are approximately 350

Catholic- and Protestant-run primary and secondary schools, whose curricula and registration are overseen by the Ministry of Education. The Sangha Supreme Council and the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand, respectively, create special curricula for Buddhist and Islamic studies required in public schools.

The Central Islamic Council of Thailand, whose members are Muslims appointed by royal proclamation, advises the Ministries of Education and Interior on Islamic issues. The government provides funding for Islamic educational institutions, the construction of mosques, and participation in the Hajj. There are several hundred primary and secondary Islamic schools throughout the country. There are four options for students to obtain Islamic education in the Deep South: government-subsidized schools offering Islamic education in conjunction with the national curriculum; private Islamic schools offering non-Quranic subjects, such as foreign languages (Arabic and English) but whose curriculum is not subject to government approval; private Islamic day schools offering Islamic education according to their own curriculum to students of all ages; and after-school religious courses for children in grades one through six, often held in mosques.

The Ministry of Justice allows the practice of sharia as a special legal process outside the national civil code for Muslim residents of the Deep South for issues involving family law, including inheritance. Provincial courts apply this law and a sharia expert advises the judge. The law officially provides the administrative structure of Muslim communities in the Deep South, including the process for appointing the Chularatchamontri, whom the King appoints as the state advisor on Islamic affairs.

The RAD sets a quota for the number of foreign missionaries permitted to register and operate in the country: 1,357 Christian, six Muslim, 20 Hindu, and 41 Sikh. Registration confers some benefits, such as longer visa validity. Representatives of the five officially recognized religious groups may apply for one-year visas that are renewable. Foreign missionaries from other religious groups must renew their visas every 90 days.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

According to Deep South Watch, through September, authorities had conducted 90 raid-and-search operations against Muslim insurgents. Deep South Watch also reported that during this period, 13 suspected insurgents were killed in clashes with security forces. The human rights NGO Duay Jai questioned the level of force used in such operations. The NGO International Crisis Group noted that the resumption of peace talks in January between the government and separatists included a commitment by both sides to an informal ceasefire during Ramadan as part of a broader plan to reduce violence. The government later stated their continued commitment to peace talks in August, following a series of insurgent attacks.

Muslim leaders in the Deep South continued to express frustration with perceived discriminatory treatment by security forces and what they said was a judicial system lacking adequate checks and balances. Duay Jai continued to voice concerns about security forces collecting DNA from suspected insurgents and their family members. Duay Jai reported that as of July, security forces collected DNA from 107 suspects and 11 family members, including one woman and one child. A spokesperson for the Internal Security Operation Command for Region 4, which is in charge of security in the Deep South, said the military would continue to collect DNA from military conscripts on what he called a voluntary basis.

Muslim leaders objected to the transfer of Wicharn-Chaisethasampan, a Buddhist and chief of the Rueso District in Narathiwat Province, on the southern border, from Rueso District to Bangkok. The religious leaders accused Wicharn of abuse of power and insulting Islam. On April 22, the director general of the Department of Provincial Administration issued an order to transfer Wicharn. On May 25, the director general reinstated Wicharn as chief of a different district in Narathiwat, a move the Muslim community opposed. Buddhist groups called for investigation of the circumstances surrounding Wicharn's transfer, claiming the statements and actions by Muslim leaders against Wicharn discriminated against the Buddhist minority. As of year's end, the dispute over the transfer continued.

Authorities continued to use emergency decree and martial law provisions in effect in the Deep South since 2005 and 2004, respectively, that gave military, police, and civilian authorities significant powers to restrict certain basic rights, including extending pretrial detention and expanding warrantless searches. Authorities delegated certain internal security powers to the armed forces, often

resulting in accusations by Muslims of unfair treatment – such as disproportionate searches of vehicles with Muslim passengers.

Khairiyah Rahmanyah, a university student and Muslim community rights activist, said authorities harassed her for speaking up for disenfranchised villagers in a Muslim-majority southern province. In 2021, authorities charged Khairiyah , along with 36 other villagers, with violating the emergency decree for participating in a sit-down protest outside Government House in Bangkok. The protest was on behalf of a Muslim community in the country's south who said their lands and livelihoods were being threatened by the construction of a large industrial estate.

According to human rights groups and media reports, some of the refugees and asylum seekers in the country were fleeing religious persecution in their countries of origin. According to UNHCR, local law considered refugees and asylum seekers who entered the country without valid visas to be illegal aliens, and thus subject to possible arrest, detention, and deportation, regardless of whether they had registered with UNHCR. According to humanitarian entities like UNHCR and NGOs, as well as CSO experts, during the year, immigration authorities conducted fewer raids to detain such persons living illegally in the country compared with previous years.

Authorities generally did not deport persons holding valid UNHCR asylum-seeker or refugee status. The government generally allowed UNHCR access to detained asylum seekers and refugees. In some cases, UNHCR-recognized refugees, including those fleeing religious persecution, reported staying in immigration detention centers (IDCs) in crowded conditions for multiple years. The government, in many cases, placed mothers and children in shelters, in accordance with a policy to cease detention of migrant children; in practice, such shelters provided greater space than IDCs but still severely restricted freedom of movement. According to international and NGOs, however, there were multiple instances during the year of the government detaining refugee and asylum-seeking minors, including Rohingya Muslims fleeing religious and ethnic persecution in Burma, in IDCs or local police stations.

Human rights activists reported during the year that police periodically monitored or detained Falun Gong practitioners, who were recognized refugees from China.

UNHCR reported that the majority of asylum seekers and refugees from China, including those in detention, were not at risk of refoulement to China.

Media outlets and NGOs reported that several dozen Uyghur Muslims from China remained in IDCs, most of them held since 2015. Five Uyghur asylum-seekers remained in prison for crimes related to an attempted escape from an IDC. Humanitarian organizations reported that Chinese authorities continued to pressure the government to return the Uyghurs to China against their will. The humanitarian groups called on the government to allow these individuals to relocate to a safe country of their choosing.

The government continued to investigate and prosecute embezzlement crimes allegedly committed by senior Buddhist monks and government officials from the NBB. On February 21, police arrested Phra Sitthi Woranayok, a senior abbot of Wat Khao Thuriem, on charges of theft and money laundering in connection with the alleged embezzlement of 110,000,000 baht (\$3.1 million) over nine years on behalf of local temples. Authorities also raided 11 other temples in Nakhon Nayok, Bangkok, and Nonthaburi. In March, the National Anti-Corruption Commission announced the completion of 52 cases, with 46 cases under investigation that involved the alleged theft of 26.7 million baht (\$773,000). Officials referred an additional 24 cases to police for further investigation.

Media outlets reported that the Ministry of Culture officially approved recognition of nine religious places of worship on August 23, three Catholic Churches and six Buddhist temples. Catholic sources said the recognition of the three Catholic churches had been pending for 93 years. Minister of Culture Itthiphon Khunpluem said the recognition of the churches was a move to address the need for religious harmony.

Despite the lack of formal legal recognition or registration, civil society organizations continued to report that unregistered religious groups operated freely and that the government's practice of not recognizing or registering new religious groups did not restrict their activities. Falun Gong members continued to report that security authorities monitored and sometimes intimidated practitioners distributing Falun Gong materials. Although registration provided some benefits, such as visas for foreign missionaries with longer validity, religious groups reported that being unregistered was not a significant barrier to foreign

missionary activity, and many unregistered missionaries worked in the country without government interference.

Buddhist monks and temple authorities continued to comply with a 2018 Sangha Supreme Council order prohibiting the use of temple land for political activities or rallies, meetings, or seminars for purposes that violated the law or affected national security, social order, or public morals. In January, three popular and outspoken Buddhist monks in Bangkok, Phra Maha Sompong Tanputto, Phra Maha Phraiwon Worawanno, and Phra Maha Somphong Rattanawangso, voluntarily left the monkhood under pressure after Buddhist leaders criticized them for their outspoken support of the student protest movement. Senior Buddhist leaders reportedly told the temple's abbot to oust the three monks or he would be removed from his position.

On January 25, the Yala Provincial Court sentenced Ai Phethong, secretary general of the Organization for Protection of Buddhism for Peace, to eight years in prison following his conviction for defaming a Muslim Prachachat Party leader, Wanmuhammad Noor Matha. The court later reduced the sentence to five years and four months. On March 24, after conviction in a separate trial, the Narathiwat Provincial Court sentenced Ai to two years and eight months in prison, also for defaming Wanmuhammad. Wanmuhammad also filed civil lawsuits against Ai in both courts under different defamation acts for Ai's social media posts accusing the politician of leading an insurgency movement in the Deep South. At the end of the year, the criminal conviction remained on appeal, and the civil lawsuits were pending without a court decision.

The law denying legal recognition to women monks (*bhikkhunis*) remained in effect despite the National Human Rights Commission's 2015 recommendation that the government amend the law. The Sangha Supreme Council continued to prohibit women from becoming monks, and women wishing to join the monkhood usually travelled to Sri Lanka to be ordained. Of the 239,023 Buddhist clergy in the country, between 250 and 300 were women. Since a gender equality law exempts cases involving "compliance with religious principles," the government excluded bhikkhunis from gender equality protection. Government officials continued neither to oppose nor to support ordination of women, although they allowed bhikkhunis to practice and establish monasteries and temples. Without official recognition, however, monasteries led by women

continued to be ineligible for any of the government benefits received by sanctioned Buddhist temples – primarily tax exemptions, free medical care, and subsidies for building construction and running social welfare programs. Unlike male monks, bhikkhunis continued to receive no special government protection from verbal or physical attacks.

The only government-certified Islamic university in the Deep South, Fatoni University, continued to teach special curricula to Muslim students, including instruction in Thai, English, Arabic, and Bahasa Malayu, a mandatory peace-studies course, and to integrate religious principles into most course offerings. As of September, the school had 2,987 students and 444 academic personnel. Two private Christian universities and one Catholic-run college, continued to provide religion courses as a component of their curricula and were open to the public.

On April 21, the Yala Administrative Court in the Deep South ruled that Muslim students should be allowed to wear religious head scarves at the Pattani Kindergarten School. The ruling ended a four-year court battle and found a Ministry of Education regulation that required students to wear uniforms without accommodation for personal religious attire was unconstitutional. The school's director appealed the court's decision and ordered students to continue to wear only school uniforms. A Muslim human rights activist requested the Ministry of Education order the school to comply with the court ruling.

For the fiscal year ending September 30, the government allocated the RAD approximately 294 million baht (\$8.5 million) to support non-Buddhist initiatives; this was the same amount as the previous fiscal year. Approximately 261.4 million baht (\$7.5 million) of that allocation went to strategic planning for religious, artistic, and cultural development, including the promotion of interfaith cooperation through peace-building projects in the Deep South; this was the same amount as the previous fiscal year. In 2021 the government allocated approximately 9.2 million baht (\$267,000) for dissemination in honor of the previous King, Rama IX. The RAD also received 1.1 million baht (\$32,000) for Deep South conflict resolution and development projects. The NBB, funded separately from the RAD, received 4.19 billion baht (\$121.3 million) in government funding, compared with 2.58 billion baht (\$74.7 million) the previous fiscal year.

The government continued to recognize elected provincial Islamic committees. Their responsibilities included providing advice to provincial governors on Islamic issues; deciding on the establishment, relocation, merger, and dissolution of mosques; appointing imams; and issuing announcements and approvals of Islamic religious activities. Committee members in the Deep South continued to report that some acted as advisers to government officials in dealing with the area's ethnonationalist and religious tensions.

Buddhist monks continued to work as missionaries, particularly in border areas among the country's tribal populations, and received some public funding. According to the NBB, 5,243 Buddhist missionaries worked nationwide. The Sangha Supreme Council required Buddhist missionaries to pass training and educational programs at Maha Makut Buddhist University or Maha Chulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya University before receiving appointments as missionaries. The government, per regulation, did not permit foreign monks to serve as Buddhist missionaries.

During the year, 11 registered foreign missionary groups with visas operated in the country: six Christian, one Muslim, two Hindu, and two Sikh groups, unchanged from the previous year. The government reported there were 1,357 registered foreign Christian missionaries. Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus had smaller numbers of foreign missionaries in the country. Some foreigners entered the country using tourist visas and conducted missionary work or activities in support of missionaries and some proselytized without RAD authorization. Non-Buddhist missionaries did not receive public funds or state subsidies.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which is not an officially recognized religious group, continued to fill its special quota of 200 foreign missionaries, granted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Security Council.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Since religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize the extent to which any incidents of violence related to the Malay Muslim insurgency were primarily based on religious identity.

According to Deep South Watch, as of September 30, violence in the Deep South, including violence perpetrated by security forces, resulted in at least 88 deaths. Among those killed were 57 Muslims, 28 Buddhists, and three individuals with unidentified religious affiliation, compared with 86 deaths, including 59 Muslims, 26 Buddhists, and two with unidentified religious affiliation, in 2021. Observers attributed the decline to a combination of the resumption of peace talks, improved security operations, and the impact of COVID-19. Local NGOs reported insurgents often considered teachers, along with their military escorts, as affiliated with the state and hence legitimate targets.

On May 13, a Buddhist teacher was wounded during a shooting while she was driving in Yala Province. At year's end, authorities were investigating the incident to determine the motive.

On March 31, an unknown individual shot at a Muslim teacher while he was on his motorcycle in Yala Province, seriously wounding him. The victim was reportedly the brother of a separatist member of the Peace Dialogue Panel who been arrested three times for alleged involvement in the insurgency. Authorities were investigating the incident to determine the motive.

On April 10, a Muslim teacher was shot and killed on his way home from a mosque in Pattani Province. Authorities were investigating the incident to determine the motive behind the killing.

Authorities blamed Muslim insurgents for the August 15 attack in Su-ngai Padi District of Narathiwat Province, during which a Buddhist villager lost her legs in a landmine explosion at her rubber farm, and a ranger was killed. Five police officers subsequently became injured when a second bomb exploded while they were investigating the initial attack.

Authorities blamed insurgents for the August 17 coordinated bomb and arson attacks on convenience stores and gas stations at 17 locations in Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani Provinces in the Deep South. One man was killed and at least seven injured in what was described as the biggest attack in the Deep South in four years.

On August 3, suspected Muslim insurgents shot two Buddhist villagers who were hunting wild boars in Narathiwat Province. At year's end, an investigation into the attack was ongoing.

Reports of violence against religious groups were largely confined to the Deep South, where ethnic Malay Muslim insurgents continued to attack Buddhists and Muslims.

Some Buddhist groups continued to express frustration with perceived special allowances for Muslims, such as financial assistance, job placement, and lower testing standards for Muslim university students.

On August 4, approximately 1,000 Muslims in Songkhla protested a plan to build the world's largest statue of the Chinese Goddess of Mercy, Guan Yin. The group claimed the statue would be built in a predominantly Muslim area and was disrespectful to local culture.

In January, the Buddhism Protection Associations in Sakon Nakhon and Phuket petitioned provincial authorities to lower the volume level of the daily Islamic call to prayers. The associations demanded loudspeakers be removed and that the mosques reduce the sound from the daily prayer.

On September 20, the NGO Protect Buddhism for Peace requested the retail conglomerate owner of 7-11 minimarts stop selling halal branded products, arguing there were more Buddhists and Christians than Muslims in the country and that non-Muslims should not have to buy expensive Central Islamic Council of Thailand halal brands.

Buddhist activists continued to campaign to designate Buddhism as the country's official religion. The platform of Pandin Dharma (Land of Dharma) Party, led by Buddhist nationalist Korn Meedee, advocated making Buddhism the state religion and called for the establishment of segregated, Buddhist-only communities in the country's three southern Muslim-majority provinces. As of 2020, the party had 10,357 members, with five regional party offices, according to the Election Commission of Thailand. In the 2019 election, the party received 21,463 votes and fielded 170 candidates; none of the party's candidates were elected.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

On November 19, the U.S. Vice President met with Supreme Patriarch Somdej Phra Ariyavamsagatanana at Wat Ratchabophit. The Vice President in her remarks affirmed U.S. respect for Thai Buddhism. During the meeting, they discussed religious freedom and interfaith relations in the country, and the role of religion in reducing conflict in the world.

Embassy officials at all levels regularly advocated with the government for greater protection of refugees and asylum seekers, specifically including those fleeing religious violence.

On April 6, the Chargé d’Affaires hosted an iftar for 32 prominent Muslim leaders to show support for religious freedom, tolerance, and interfaith dialogue. The Ambassador and embassy officials frequently visited religious sites of local significance and met with UNHCR, international NGOs, academics, and representatives of faith-based organizations to discuss religious pluralism, tolerance, and assistance to refugees fleeing religious persecution. Embassy officials awarded multiple grants to partners in the Deep South for projects focusing on diversity and inclusion, youth engagement, community building, and digital literacy/disinformation training.

Embassy officials led quarterly virtual conversations with faith leaders, bringing together academics, religious leaders, community organizers, and youth influencers to create new connections, share perspectives on religious freedom issues, and consider future collaboration. In April, the Chargé d’Affaires visited the Deep South where he hosted an iftar with local religious leaders and engaged university students in an interfaith community-building project.